



## *The Insider*

April 2, 2010

[www.SenSwitalski.com](http://www.SenSwitalski.com)

# Freaky Friday Role Reversal

*Switalski Proposes GOP School Reforms; Republicans Defeat Their Own Proposals*

Every so often the world is turned upside down. Black is White, Day is Night, and Dogs and Cats start snuggling together.

It happened in the Senate last week. There is a certain rhythm to budget work. The Republicans generally make cuts, and the Democrats attempt to restore programs. With the poor economy and the state's deficit, we have been doing a lot more cutting than restoring of spending.

During committee hearings, I had offered an amendment to implement the Governor's proposal to reduce the sales tax from 6 cents to 5.5 cents, and to spread the sales tax to certain services that are currently untaxed. The plan would allow school funding to be frozen, rather than cut, and permit the elimination of the surcharge on the Michigan Business Tax and lower the Business Tax rate.

Although polls show the public is closely divided on the proposal, the Senate Republican Majority has no interest in the Governor's plan, and my amendment went down 10-6 on a party line vote. I am one of the few Democrats willing to sponsor money-raising tax proposals, so I thought it was important to give the Governor's proposal a hearing and a vote. That's why I offered the amendment.

The defeat of the amendment was no surprise. But by bringing it to a vote, I now have an answer for people who ask why we don't just solve the budget shortfall by raising taxes. The defeat of my amendment provides demonstrable proof to the world that it is not possible to raise taxes right now. For our immediate purpose of passing a budget, it shows that some other approach besides revenues is required.

I believe in getting the job done, which means passing the budgets, so I next tried the complete opposite approach. If there was no majority for revenues, then I would offer some substantive cuts and reforms.

This is especially necessary because the School Aid Budget offered by the Republicans depended on a \$200 million appropriation from the state's General Fund to achieve balance. Unfortunately, the General Fund is \$1.1 billion in the red. There is no money in it to give to Schools.

To me, the practice of spending money from a fund that is in deficit is not honest budgeting. It simply hides the deficit in another area. So I decided to offer real cuts and reforms to balance the School Aid budget.

I decided to pick the best ideas offered by my Republican colleagues, and offer them as amendments to the budget. There were several good ones to pick from, and I figured they would be flattered by the attention.

First I took a bill by Senator Bruce Patterson, (R-Canton), which would limit salaries for School Superintendents below that of the Governor. It is hard to argue that Superintendents have a tougher job than someone in charge of the whole state. The Governor makes \$159,300, but some school superintendents make over \$200,000. At a time when we are making teachers and state workers take pay cuts, concessions, and layoffs, shouldn't that pain be shared at the top of the organization? Shouldn't everyone have to sacrifice? Executive pay is generally out of proportion in America, and schools are no different than the private sector.

### **School Reform Amendments**

#### **Limit Executive Pay**

Require School Superintendent salaries to be below the salary of the Governor of Michigan.

#### **Lower Administrative Costs**

Limit School Administrative expenses to 28% of School Operating Budgets

#### **Consolidate Elections**

Require all elections to be held in November, saving schools \$10 million by eliminating February and May ballots

#### **Make School Executives Teach**

Reduce Administrative burden by requiring top management to teach at least one class

## —Continued from page one

Furthermore, as we are cutting school operations, shouldn't we try to direct scarce resources to the classroom, where the students are, and reduce overhead and administrative costs? This bill does just that, so I proposed to tie-bar SB 1148 to the School Aid budget. With the tie-bar, both the reform and the budget would both have to pass before either could become law.

Unfortunately, when I put the amendment up for a vote, a strange thing happened. Although I had given Senator Patterson and the Republicans full credit for the idea, and reminded them that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, they voted down my amendment. Most Democrats voted for the amendment, but since we are in the minority, we couldn't get enough votes to pass it.

Undaunted, I pressed on. My next amendment was to tie-bar a Senator Patty Birkholz (R-Saugatuck) bill to the budget. I said her bill, SB 1073, was brilliant and deserved to become law. It provided a limit on administrative expenses to 28% of the school's operating budget. When the Senate Republicans rolled out their "Year of Reform" plan in February, this approach was featured prominently as a key component.

But neither of these bills had gotten so much as a hearing in the intervening weeks. So I offered my amendment, giving my colleagues full credit for originating the idea. I was glad to offer my support for this initiative to reduce administrative costs and drive money into the classroom.

But once again my amendment was defeated, with most Democrats supporting the proposal and Republicans voting down their own idea.

It was like the movie *Freaky Friday*, when Mother Jamie Lee Curtis and Daughter Lindsey Lohan get trapped in each other's bodies and have to live in each other's world for a day. The Democrats were voting for reforms, but somehow the Republicans were voting against their own cuts.

I modified my tactics. My next amendment was to tie the School Budget to a bill of my own, SB 888, which requires schools to consolidate election to November, and eliminates "stealth" elections in the dead of winter when seniors are in Florida. It would require that we abolish election dates in February and May, when schools have to pay to hold their own election, and make them piggyback on existing elections in November. Instead of paying \$100,000 to hold an election that gets 4% turnout, they could hold the election for free, and vastly increase voter turnout.

I took care to note that 2 Republican Senators, Cameron Brown (R-Fawn River) and Michelle McManus (R-Lake Leelanau) had sponsored similar bills.

But again the amendment went down in flames.

Where were my fiscally responsible, reforming Republican friends when I needed them? I had my Democrats voting for some tough reforms, which is not that easy to do, but now I had lost the conservatives. Talk about frustration!

I indulged myself with a pet amendment in my final attempt. I believe that Superintendents, and Assistant Superintendents, and Associate Superintendents and anyone else in the schools with a professional expertise, should teach at least one class. Students

would benefit from having a class with the highest paid talent in the school, and the administrators would be a lot more sympathetic to teachers if they faced the same classroom problems staff does. I suspect there are many school employees who can't wait to get out of the classroom, which makes you wonder why they want to work at a school.

But my idea is clearly too radical for people. As one administrator said, "*School would be a great place if we could just figure out a way to get rid of the students.*" If my amendment passed, it would be the greatest retirement incentive ever devised by man. Unfortunately, it failed.

My colleague Senator Gretchen Whitmer (D-Lansing) took up the fight and offered a revenue amendment that half a dozen Republicans had previously sponsored. But it failed also.

We won't give up. When we return, maybe Freaky Friday will be over and some of these reforms will be adopted.

### Excerpts from the Senate Journal

"This amendment will tie bar the budget bill to a substitute to a brilliant Senator Patterson bill that places a cap on Superintendent wages. We all know how shy and retiring Senator Patterson is, and he doesn't want to get up and speak about his own bill, but I think it is so good and I like it so much that I want to tie bar this budget bill to it. We have to do a lot of reforms, and we've got to make some cuts. I think this is a very reasonable thing to do. The cuts should be felt all the way through education. I hope members will support this tie bar that will require a cap on superintendent wages."

Defeated, 12-25

"It is true, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Once again, I have been borrowing the brilliant ideas from my colleagues across the aisle and offering them as my own in these amendments, but I give them full credit. These are very good ideas. This amendment tie bars a substitute to the Birkholz bill that would restrict administrative costs to no more than 28 percent. This is part of the Republican package of reforms. I think it is a very legitimate reform. We have to drive resources into the classroom, and this is a way to do that."

Defeated, 14-23

"This one is actually one of my own bills. I have to take credit for this one. It is a tie-bar to an election consolidation bill that would restrict elections to August and November. Let me add that my two worthy colleagues—great minds think alike—Senators McManus and Brown have offered similar legislation to consolidate elections. I commend them for these ideas. We are all thinking along the same lines, that schools are wasting resources and government is wasting resources by holding duplicative, low-turnout elections. We should consolidate them to August and November. This tie-bar would do that. I hope members will vote for more efficient government and support my amendment."

Defeated, 10-27